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ABSTRACT

This booklet addresses the educational needs of students who, though not dyslexic, do have isolated reading difficulties and/or difficulties with written work, caused by a disturbance in Executive Function, a term borrowed from Dr. Martha Denckla meaning the ability to organize, manage time, perform independent tasks, etc. A question and answer format is used to provide information on problems in Executive Function. This information includes age at which such problems arise, the neurological basis of such problems, the relationship of problems with Executive Function and attention deficit disorder and hyperactivity, the specific processes comprising Executive Function, strategies for assisting students with such problems, the value of a specialized program (rather than mainstream instruction) for such children, common concerns regarding the child attending a special school for children with language problems, and the benefits of a specialized boarding school for such children. (DB)

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This pamphlet is about a group of intelligent young people whose educational needs are often misunderstood. When compared to classic dyslexic children these students have relatively isolated reading difficulties. Their spelling is also impaired, but their major difficulty is in written work. If homework is completed at all, the quality is extremely poor. Teachers remark that this type of student clearly understands the subject matter, and suggest that poor performance is due to lack of structure or motivation.

The following paragraphs describe such a student.

During the final marking period of fourth grade, school officials suggested that Joshua not be promoted. Although his reading and spelling were within the average range for the class, Joshua was extremely deficient in his written work. He took forever to get started on an assignment, was frequently off-task, and managed to misplace most of the papers he completed. Class recitation proved that he understood the work, and even seemed to enjoy it.

At times Joshua also appeared impulsive, but well below the threshold of a hyperactive child. School personnel expressed concern that the increased demands for independent work, characteristic of fifth grade, could result in failure. However, it was recognized that he had many friends in the class and would be devastated if held back. It was finally decided, for social reasons, to risk the demands of fifth grade. The first few months of fifth grade confirmed the worst fears of the teachers. Despite all the extra help from the classroom teacher, Joshua could not keep up with the work. Just to begin work on an assignment was a

project in itself. In order to avoid devoting an inordinate amount of time to Joshua, the teacher began to lower the standards by which his work was judged. This double-standard did not escape notice from his peers. While they continued to be his friends, some cutting remarks were made. Whether from anxiety or increased difficulty of vocabulary, Joshua lost interest in the subjects he was good at, and rolled his eyes when anyone suggested he had talent in anything. If his parents or teachers complimented his work, he often tore it up. Joshua's teachers began to make frequent calls to his parents when Joshua, to the delight of his classmates began to make rude and disruptive remarks in class.

A conference was called and Joshua's parents were presented with three options: Joshua could have after-school tutoring, instead of sports, could be removed from art class to attend a special needs class, or could be enrolled in a school where the program was tailored to his needs.

The following questions examine the causes behind the behavior of students like Joshua. To facilitate this examination we are borrowing a term from Dr. Martha Denckla*, a researcher at John Hopkins University, who has extensively studied student output. Dr. Denckla teaches that students who experience such problems as lack of organization, poor time-management, and isolated phonological errors have a disturbance in Executive Function.

*Denckla, Martha, "Executive Function, The overlap zone between attention deficit; hyperactivity disorders and Learning Disabilites." *International Pediatric*, Vol. 4 #April-June, 1989.

1. At what age do problems in Executive Function occur?

They can occur at any age. However, they are not usually noticed until fifth grade, when students are expected to complete more independent assignments. This may help explain why many bright students begin to fail when they reach middle school. Students with very superior intelligence may succeed in masking difficulties in Executive Function until higher grades.

2. Are difficulties with Executive Function primarily physical or psychological?

Researchers generally agree that problems with Executive Function are neurologically based and involve the delayed development of Myelin, a fatty substance forming a sheath about certain nerve fibers. Disagreements exists on which parts of the brain are affected. Because of its effect on output and performance, disturbances in executive function are sometimes wrongly judged to be primarily attitude or motivation issues, and treated accordingly. Frequently this approach engenders a self fulfilling prophecy. A student will develop an "attitude problem" if he is judged lazy because of unrecognized Executive Function problems.

3. What is the relationship between problems with Executive Function, and attention deficit and hyperactivity?

Considerable confusion has reigned among diagnosticians about the attention deficit and hyperactive diagnosis. It has been changed several times in the *Diagnostic Statistical Manual*, the official handbook for psychiatric diagnosis. Some leading researchers in the field disagree on whether this syndrome is a physical problem or a conduct disturbance. Moreover, some professionals question whether it should even exist as a diagnostic entity. Thus direct comparisons are difficult. Nevertheless, Executive Function helps explain some of the output-related features usually attributed to attention deficit. Staying on task, smooth transitions, and inhibiting inappropriate behaviors are qualities of intact Executive Function and goals of the attention deficit disorder and hyperactive student. The next question will throw additional light on this relationship.

4. What specific processes does Executive Function encompass?

Executive Function encompasses the following output-related processes: Initiating, Shifting, Inhibiting, Sustaining, Vigilance, Planning, Organizing, and Strategizing. Most children with language learning problems also experience difficulty with these processes. However, some notable exceptions occur. Students with a significant discrepancy between the performance and verbal scores on the

WISC (performance being higher) demonstrate good Executive Function skills when working on an art project. They will also keep their belongings organized and demonstrate intuitive good sense when participating socially or in athletic events. Their difficulties are specifically language-related, but in certain situations, they can be taught to utilize their well-developed executive function skills to partially compensate for language problems.

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5. Many students experience problems with one or more of the Executive Function attributes. At what point is it considered a learning disability?

If a person makes periodic spelling errors that does not mean he is a dyslexic. However, if poor or unrecognizable spelling characterize a person's entire output then dyslexia is a likely possibility. Likewise if a person gets distracted at times or experiences isolated problems in making transitions, that does not mean he has an Executive Function disturbance. However, when several of the components of Executive Function are missing or below standard, and the student is working below potential, then it is fair to say that Executive Function is part of a learning disability. The presence of isolated phonological problems also provides confirmation.

6. What are some strategies for assisting children with problems in Executive Function?

These children need specific guidance during the output process. A structured program, with emphasis on highlighting successful performance, provides the ideal intervention. When working within a well-designed program a student will be trained in the attributes of Executive Function according to his needs and abilities. Beginning with how to start and sustain an academic activity, the student will progress to learning organizational skills, strategizing and planning. An independently written term paper would require intact functioning of all attributes of Executive Function.

As a student progresses along the output continuum he needs reassurance and feedback that his performance is improving. The key element in the program design is to offer work which is sufficiently challenging, but allows for successful completion. Most importantly, the students entire energy should be directed exclusively toward improving his own work, rather than comparing his work with the work of others.

7. Are Executive Function problems handled in the mainstream, or should the student be enrolled in a specialized program?

Although it might be tempting to teach and practice the skills of Executive Function in the mainstream, such an approach contains some real dangers. Students who have Executive Function problems feel overwhelmed if they are expected to perform at the level of their normal peers. On the other hand if their assignments are appropriately modified they feel significantly out of sync with their classmates. Since their intellectual ability is usually obvious, they are often judged to be unmotivated or lazy because their output is both meagre and of low quality. Some of the greatest anger I have experienced in students resulted from years of such "isolation" and misjudgment within the mainstream.

When enrolled in a specialized program the student works with teachers who can design the appropriate work to assure both challenge and success. This combination is critical because if the work is too easy a student feels condescension; if it it too hard he feels overwhelmed. Teachers with the proper training and experience know how to skate this thin line between adequate challenge and success.

8. Won't a child feel isolated and different if he attends a school which limits its enrollment to children with language problems?

The reservation most frequent expressed about specialized programs is that the student will feel isolated and different. Actually the opposite is true. Once the student meets a peer group with a learning style similar to his own, he feels a new sense of belonging. In such an environment, skills are mastered more easily and the student develops a true sense of self-confidence.

9. What are the benefits of a specialized boarding school for students with Executive Function problems?

While it is conceivably possible for families and schools to coordinate a program to improve Executive Function skills, it is difficult to consistently provide all the appropriate elements. On the other hand, in a boarding school everything from making one's bed in the morning to end of study hall at night can be coordinated and supported with minimal strain on either student or faculty. Within such a structure, students gradually acquire the habits which smooth the daily activities of student life.

While these skills are being mastered, they enjoy the company of other students who share the same goals. They realize that their peers are normal and highly intelligent students, and need not limit their aspirations. Many of

these new friendships last far beyond the years at boarding school.

Contrary to feeling isolated or singled out, students in boarding programs which are designed for the way they think and learn, develop a deep sense of self-confidence which serves them well when they return to the mainstream of education.

* * *

Most students do not specialize in their studies until the final years of high school or college. For students with language and Executive Function needs, specialization during the early years of their education will enhance success later on.

FOR FURTHER INFORMATION

Information on residential programs for students in need of remedial language skill training is available in the "Boarding Schools" directory published annually by the National Association of Independent Schools. This guide is distributed to many libraries, public school guidance offices, educational counselors, and private school admissions staff, or may be obtained by contacting: Boarding Schools, c/o NAIS, 75 Federal Street, Boston, MA 02110; (617) 451-2444.

NOTES

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

THOMAS SCHEIDLER is the founding director of The Greenwood School, a junior boarding school for boys with dyslexia and related language disorders. His previous experience includes directing a remedial boarding school and clinical practice in outpatient psychotherapy at a mental health center.